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ABSTRACT

Data from a longitudinal study of freshmen at three California community colleges is presented. This project, the 3-D Project, views freshmen in three colleges on the basis of a construct formulated by Brawer called Functional Potential. Functionsl Potential is a hypothetical construct built on psychodynamic principles which describe the degree to which a person is able to tolerate ambiguity, delay gratification, exhibit adaptive flexibility, demonstrate goal directness, relate to self and others, and have a clear sense of personal identity. Ss were 1876 community college freshmen, tested during their first week in school. A follow-up test was administered at the end of the second semester for students in the initial testing group who were still in school. Data collected included individual characteristics and demographic information and data regarding attitudes, feelings, values, and goals. Findings are discussed. (CK)

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A COMPARISON OF THE PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT DROPOUTS AND PERSISTERS

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JC 730 276

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INTRODUCTION

The data presented in this Topical Paper come from a longitudinal study of freshmen at three California community colleges. Abbreviated the "3-D study," the name stands for "The Project for the Design, Development, and Dissemination of Research Models for Junior Colleges." The project was undertaken by the staff of the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges in 1969-70 and results have been reported in several publications.

The 3-D Project differs from previous research on college students, indeed, from most attempts to understand students at any educational level. It views freshmen in three colleges on the basis of a construct formulated by Brawer called Functional Potential (1970 and 1971). Functional Potential is a hypothetical construct built on psychodynamic principles which describe the degree to which a person is able to tolerate ambiguity, delay gratification, exhibit adaptive flexibility, demonstrate goal directedness, relate to self and others, and have a clear sense of personal identity. It views the individual in terms of the personal dynamics that are basic to his behavior and life-style. According to Brawer, "It provides both a conceptual foundation upon which the observer may build descriptions of an individual's behavior and a set of dimensions by which the individual may understand himself" (1973, p. 34).

The subjects of the study were 1876 community college freshmen, tested during their first week in school. The colleges they attended were selected because of their geographic proximity as well as their diversity and were named Urban, Suburban and Rural--names roughly indicative of the type of institution and locale they represented. A follow-up testing session occurred

at the end of the second semester for students in the initial testing group who were still in school.

A wide variety of information about the students was gathered. First, the Omnibus Personality Inventory (Heist and Yonge, 1962), a polyphasic technique designed especially to assess characteristics of normal college populations, was administered. The second instrument used, the Freshman Survey, is a paper and pencil inventory designed to obtain demographic information and data regarding attitudes, feelings, and values as well as goal directedness about students. The Survey includes items from which Functional Potential scores were derived and thus provides the primary source of data for the 3-D study. The Terminal Values and Instrumental Values Scales (Rokeach, 1968) were included in the Survey as was an abbreviated version of Pace's College and University Environment Scale (1969).

The findings of the 3-D study have been reported and discussed in a number of publications. For example, a report of the responses of the freshmen from three colleges to the two values scales is available in Brawer (1971). Responses to these values scales by faculty members from the same three colleges are considered in Park (1971). A more complete description of the study, the theoretical basis of the instruments used as well as analysis of the concept of Functional Potential, is available in Brawer's New Perspectives on Personality Development in College Students (1973).

A COMPARISON OF THE PERSONALITY CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT DROPOUTS AND PERSISTERS

Florence B. Brawer

Educators, psychologists, and other behavioral scientists have long been interested in the phenomenon of premature withdrawal from school. Before the 16-year-old compulsory education law was enacted, high school and even elementary school dropouts were subjects of concern. In the past half century or so, this same concern--shifted now to higher education--has accounted for much of the literature relating to student populations. In fact, so many reports attest to the popularity of this issue that even in 1966, Knoell could state that studies of the college dropout would soon rival in sheer numbers the many studies on college predictions.

Of somewhat more recent origin is the broad public concern with the college dropout, a term that has become an easy euphemism for social deviancy by a society that views its high academic attrition as "a nefarious gambit that is being foisted on the nation by an educational establishment and well-propagandized parents who now equate learning solely with the number of school years completed" (Gross, 1969). Attrition has thus become one of the great contemporary issues in higher education with implications of natural scope, as has the process in which students return to school after one or more periods away.

Whatever term is applied to this phenomenon, whether it is seen from the standpoint of the student and his unique characteristics, whether it is viewed as academia's inadequate holding power, or whether it becomes a reflection of society itself--over a wide span of years, many investigators have attempted

to understand the situation, predict its occurrence, and adjust programs to cope with it (Kubie, 1966; Panos and Astin, 1967; Pervin, Reik, and Dalrymple, 1966; Summerskill, 1962). The matter of " . . . dropping out of college, with its widespread ramifications in educational and social realms, transcends the merely personal psychology of the individual . . . [highlighting] the ancient struggle between the environment and the individual, each trying to modify the other in ways as complex as life itself, until a better balance is achieved" (Pervin et al, 1966, p. 3).

The construct--dropout or stopout--provides a comparatively clear-cut, either/or situation, one that can be readily assessed as an objective dependent variable. However, the ease of assigning a designation and the plethora of material available in the literature do not necessarily imply that the phenomenon is clearly understood. Despite many compilations of data regarding the demographic, financial, and sociological concomitancies of attrition, a tendency to assign blame is apparent. When this blame is ascribed to student motivation--an important but certainly a nebulous variable--attempts to understand the problem become even more tenuous. "Motivational difficulties" may sound respectable on paper and may provide a ready excuse by which students, parents, and educators can offer justification for what they perceive as failure but they really neither explain nor answer the question. Indeed, the issue of blame itself is open to question because dropout cannot be seen as solely a failure on anybody's part. Extended to its greatest limits, of course, the failure to attain advanced degrees suggests that the majority of adults in this country are dropouts.

What are the concomitants of dropout? Do people who fail to complete two or four or eight years of post-secondary education fare any worse (or any

better) than those who attain associate or baccalaureate or graduate degrees? Questions still remain regarding the characteristics that might differentiate between students who drop out and students who elect to complete the programs that they had designated at the time they initially entered college. Other questions continuing to plague workers in education and the mental health disciplines envelop the reasons--conscious and unconscious--for entering particular schools; the students' reactions to premature departures; the financial burden of processing academic applications that result in no-show; and the cost to the community in dollars and cents as well as in emotional complications--less tangible but equally important consequences of excessive attrition. Many investigations contribute to our present-day knowledge about the effects of withdrawal but the questions still persist.

Many of these queries about early withdrawal are, of course, tied up with a multiplicity of related dimensions--problems of economics for school, community, and students; sociological concerns; selection proceedings; academic preparation; and goal orientation. They also involve concerns with environmental press (Astin, 1964; Murray, 1938; Pace, 1966; Stern, Stein, and Bloom, 1963) and the whole area of personality assessment and ego functioning. When students leave schools before they complete their course work and/or designated programs, is it because the schools failed to meet their expectations? Is it because, initially, it was unrealistic for a particular individual to enter such and such an institution? Are less adaptive students more likely to drop out if expectations and realities are disparate? Or do dropouts include the most talented and independent students (Suczek and Alpert, 1966)? What are, in fact, the students' expectations? What are the realities of the community/junior college and do these "realities" vary from one institution

to another? Finally, is there a relation between ego strength or Functional Potential and the attrition patterns of college freshmen?

The numbers of perspectives from which student dropout has been surveyed provide some answers--at least, tentatively. For example, while economic and social conditions certainly contribute to attrition, these are not now typically seen as either the primary sources or the only forces. Personality conflicts, draft-marriage-job dilemmas, academic inadequacies--all these are part of the issue. The general common-sense analysis of the situation is heightened by the actual figures, which serve but to reinforce the tendencies to attribute blame as well as to ascertain etiology.

But just as attrition is complex, so are the varied ways of looking at--and hopefully, of understanding--the student who fails to complete the academic program he had previously designated, or does not attain a degree or certificate. The complexity reflects questions about identity, peer and parental influence, socio-economic factors--indeed, the gamut of antecedent causes and situational issues that surround many broad problems concerning human functioning. Personality factors are also brought into the fold when questions of attrition are asked, some indicators suggesting that certain characteristics do, indeed, distinguish the withdrawing student from the persister. However, the dimensions prescribed as key variables often vary with the rationale and the instruments from which the data are drawn. If the question of dropout continues to be viewed as critical, it must then be seen as unfortunate that, in spite of either emphasis or attributed characteristics, there is no resolution of the dropout phenomenon, the advancement of knowledge regarding it, nor "the development of better understanding of college dropouts" (Summerskill, 1962, p. 629). To date, the research "has tended to be microcosmic in nature,

rather than macrocosmic" (Knoell, 1966, p.68) and highly inadequate to meet the demands of contemporary education.

"In the junior college," according to Knoell, ". . . the attrition is exceedingly high after only one year and . . . a large proportion of the students in a transfer program do not enter into state institutions" (1966, pp. 70-79). The rest of this paper addresses itself to some studies about dropout/persistence in the junior/community college and to attrition data obtained from the 3-D Project.

RELATED STUDIES

Almost every report about research in the junior college could begin with some statement like, "Published literature on the junior college students in regard to such and such a concept lags considerably behind research on the four-year college and university student--especially when noncognitive or nonacademic variables are considered." In support of this kind of statement Cross found that studies of junior college students were such a new phenomenon in 1968 that most available references in her research synthesis bore publication dates of 1966 or 1967. Accordingly, there appeared to be no need to conduct any systematic search of the literature prior to 1960. Further, of the research that was reported--whether at the two-year or four-year/university level --intellectual factors relating to withdrawal and achievement rather than noncognitive variables were typically stressed.

So be it with studies of attrition in the community/junior college. Although most colleges tabulate data about persistence, these reports are seldom circulated. Some studies, most often demographic in nature, are found in ERIC'S Research in Education, a monthly journal of educational abstracts.

Some are published in monograph or book form but few are reported in either the educational or psychological literature. And in the few instances when material on junior college students is reported, the chief concern is again with students at other types of institutions--and only include junior college populations peripherally. Worthy of note here is Astin's (1965) follow-up investigation of some 36,000 freshmen at 248 colleges and universities. The picture emerging of the typical freshman most likely not to complete his college program within four years was of a person who had relatively low grades in high school; did not plan to go on to graduate school or professional work; came from a relatively low socioeconomic background; had a racial background that was either American Indian or "other" (possible: Caucasian, Negro, Oriental, American Indian, or "other"); was relatively more likely than non-dropouts to have declared business, engineering, or secretarial work as a probable career occupation; was more likely to have been married upon starting college; and, was enrolled in a college where automobiles were frequently used by students. Conversely, dropout was less likely if students were characterized as friendly, cooperative, and independent, if they participated in college activities, and if the college had relatively permissive administrative policies and demonstrated concern for the student as an individual.

More recent data obtained from students at 217 two-year colleges and universities suggest that by the severest measures of persistence (i.e., completing a baccalaureate degree within four years), 53% of all students entering four-year colleges or universities can be called dropouts (Astin, 1964). In the two-year participating colleges, dropout rates are somewhat higher--61.6% of the entering students dropping out before completing their programs.

These higher attrition rates at two-year colleges were attributed to the lower level of matriculation and the poorer academic preparation of the entering students but they were still somewhat lower than Astin had expected.

Supporting results are found in other studies. Information gleaned from both cumulative records and student interviews suggests that the dropout generally comes from a lower socioeconomic background, had parents who did not attend college, and perceived the college's academic offerings and counseling services as inadequate. At the same time, almost half of the withdrawals surveyed by Bossen and Burnett (1970) eventually returned to school--implying that attrition rates in junior college may not be as high as originally estimated if the definition of attrition is altered. Again--problems of inconsistent definition and ambiguous criteria crop up--problems compounded by other variables that are sometimes conflicting.

In an attempt to relate selected variables to attrition data from one junior college, Cohen and Brawer (1970) defined dropouts as students who failed to complete their first college semester, did not enroll for a second semester, or did not transfer to another college. Persisters were designated as students who did complete their first semester and either re-enrolled in the same college or transferred to another institution. Since several assumptions basic to this investigation seem appropriate for related research on the college dropout, they are designated here:

1. There is a need for basic research to isolate personality dimensions so that the potential school dropout may be identified.

2. Characteristics that differentiate students with high dropout potential from students with high persistence potential must be identified and compared so that academic procedures can be developed ani evaluated.

3. Academic attrition cannot be viewed solely in terms of the student, no matter how thorough the analysis may be. The issue is a multifaceted one that requires investigation of the student interacting with other members of the college milieu-peers, faculty, administrative forces--and with the college environment itself.

4. Despite many efforts to isolate and understand characteristics of the "good" teacher, student withdrawal rates typically are not related to dimensions of teacher personalities, abilities, or goal orientation.

5. In that a high dropout rate may eventually affect faculty morale, withdrawal rates have implications for faculty members. This may be especially true in the teaching of introductory courses to college freshmen where a circular effect can take place--students become disenchanted with faculty members and faculty become disenchanted with students (Iffert, 1964).

6. Lack of experimentation with action programs designed specifically to reduce attrition is apparent.

7. A need exists for analysis of institutional organizational characteristics that might effect attrition rates.

8. The question of college attrition requires continual in depth investigation, as well as the implementation of relevant research findings. While all dimensions of the phenomenon can hardly be encompassed in a single project with limited populations, it is important that suggestions from other studies be entertained in any new research.

9. "Although the term 'college dropout' has become a bad word in the popular press and the American home town . . . the possibilities of both loss and benefits should be considered" (Ford and Urban, 1966, p. 83). Perhaps dropout is not a negative term; indeed, the dropout may be exhibiting different types of strengths than his fellow students.

10. Early identification of the potential dropout may lead to more clearly defined goals and more efficient use of resources. Programs may be especially tailored to answer the specific needs of different kinds of students enrolled for varying periods of time and various purposes. Identification of problems associated with the dropout may also lead to evaluation of what is learned in the schools, by whom, and to what ends. (Cohen and Brawer, 1970, pp. 19-20.)

In order to learn whether certain personality, ability, and/or demographic characteristics differentiate college dropouts from persisters,

three instruments were administered to freshmen entering a California community college: the Omnibus Personality Inventory (Heist and Yonge, 1962), the Adaptive-Flexibility Inventory (Brawer, 1967), and a short biographical questionnaire (Cohen and Brawer, 1970). At the end of what would have been their first college semester, dropouts tended to be enrolled for fewer than 12 units whereas persisters were enrolled for 12 units or more ($X^2 = 20.03$, $p < .01$); to be employed more time outside school than persisters ($x^2 = 20.05$, $p < .01$); and to have attended more schools prior to the 10th grade than persisters ($X^2 = 12.65$, $p < .01$). The mothers of dropouts tended to have less education than those of persisters, with more mothers of dropouts failing to complete high school ($X^2_{\sigma_v} = 12.93$, $p < .05$).

In regard to the A-F Inventory, a technique designed to assess ego strength in the functioning adolescent or adult, the mean score for the persisters (4.35) was slightly higher than for the dropouts (4.28), but the difference was not significant. The mean score for females was significantly higher ($\underline{t} = 2.28$, $p < .05$) than for the male students.

Omnibus Personality Inventory data were tabulated after one and after two semesters. The mean for first-semester dropouts on the Thinking Introversion (TI) scale was significantly higher than the second-semester dropouts' mean ($t = 2.28$, $p < .05$); and higher on the Estheticism (E) scale ($t = 2.41$, $p < .05$). On the Interest Orientation (IO) scale, the mean for second-semester dropouts was higher than that of the first-semester dropouts ($\underline{t} = 2.24$, $p < .05$). Sex differences in OPI scale responses also were noted. The mean scores for females were higher than those of males on Thinking Introversion (TI) ($\underline{t} = 2.16$, $p < .05$); Estheticism (E) ($\underline{t} = 4.30$, $p < .01$); Complexity (C) ($t = 2.23$, $p < .05$);

Autonomy (A) ($t = 2.65$, $p < .01$); Social Extroversion (SE) ($t = 2.29$, $p < .05$); and Altruism (Am) ($t = 4.35$, $p < .01$). The male respondents' mean scores were higher on Religious Orientation (RO) ($t = 2.08$, $p < .05$); Impulse Expression (IE) ($t = 2.73$, $p < .01$); Practical Orientation (PO) ($t = 3.51$, $p < .01$); and Interest Orientation (IO) ($t = 8.30$, $p < .01$).

Certain implications stem from these findings. Since non-persisters tended to be enrolled for fewer than the twelve units typically considered a minimal load for a full-time junior college student, less commitment to school is implied. Hence, it might be assumed that when conditions within the college become unpleasant or impinge on other activities such as--a job,--the non-committed are more inclined to leave school than students who seem more dedicated to a full program. Also suggested by the fact that dropouts reported more time spent in outside employment than persisters--and consistent with much of the literature on the college dropout--is that withdrawal may be related to financial pressures. Such employment may well reflect financial need but since this variable was not definitely established for this sample, its influence is tenuous. Financial conditions may be related to attrition but are not necessarily always attributable to it.

Family mobility also is seen as an influential predeterminator in that the non-persisters of this sample attended more schools prior to the tenth grade than did persisters. There is the implication of early family instability as well as a pattern of non-completion that, once established, may tend to persist in various forms when students react to different situations. Another instance of the influential role of family patterns on school persistence is seen in the finding that mothers of dropouts were less likely

than mothers of persisters to have completed high school.

Dropouts may be less committed than persisters but they may be more realistic. For purposes of this study, individual student grades were computed by section (transfer, basic, remedial) and the instructors were ranked according to grading practices. When the statement, "The higher the grades given by an instructor, the lower the number of students who drop his classes," was tested, a correlation of .71 ($p < .05$) resulted. One implication of this finding is that many students drop out of classes--and indeed, drop out of school--when they realize they are in a precarious position gradewise. When OPI measures were related to placement in English classes, the results implied that so-called "tracking" practices may actually be differentiating between students who are oriented in different directions. If further study substantiates this inference, it would be reasonable for junior colleges to place students in English classes on the basis of either goal orientation (academic or vocational) or a test of English usage. However, if goal orientation and personality measures point to both placement and propensity to persist (or drop), and a test of English usage suggests only placement, it may be more expedient to use the measures that yield the greater amount of information.

ATTRITION AND THE 3-D PROJECT

So much for related studies which attempt to differentiate between college persisters and dropouts and to draw predictive patterns--all with varying degrees of success. What about attrition figures for the students engaged in the 3-D Project? Is any one of the three sample schools--Urban, Suburban, or Rural --more likely to have higher or lower retention figures than the other two? Do attrition figures correlate with other demographic variables characterizing

this student population? In some cases, the data were reported for a nine-month period--that is, after two college semesters were completed. In other cases, both the one year/two semester (June 1, 1970) and the two year/four semester (June, 1971) periods were used to provide figures regarding attrition, program completion (as measured by obtaining the AA degree), and/or transfer to another institution.

Drop/Persist and Functional Potential. The X^2 test for independent samples was used to test the hypothesis that the proportion of students who dropped out of junior college within the first year (two semesters) was the same for the three Functional Potential groups. While 31.3% of the 1271 students in the Medium F.P. group and 43.5% of the 170 students in the Low F.P. group had dropped, only 26.2% of the 435 High F.P. students had done so. This resulted in a X^2 (2) = 17.09 ($p < .001$). As one moves from Low to High Functional Potential, the proportion of students who, within their first year, dropped out of the three subject colleges decreases.

Examination of dropout data for all three schools after two years by means of the k sample X^2 test of homogeneity gave a X^2 (4) = 13.01 ($p < .025$) with respect to both dropout and Functional Potential group. Of the 1876 students in the total sample, 47% had dropped, 42.2% persisted and 10.8% were of unknown status. There were 170 in the Low F.P. group; of these, 55.3% dropped, 34.1% persisted, and 10.9% were unknown. For the 435 students in the High group, 41.2% dropped, 48.5% persisted, and 10.3% were unknown.

Excluding the above unknowns, a X^2 test was performed and resulted in a X^2 (2) = 12.88 ($p < .005$). This indicates a definite statistical relationship between Functional Potential and persistence in college, the proportion of

each group who persisted increasing with a rise in the Functional Potential group from Low to High. This relationship is strongest in the Suburban school; the other two schools had the same tendency but to a lesser extent.

Using the two-year data to determine whether each Functional Potential group had a similar dropout experience, the k sample X^2 test of homogeneity was then applied to each school separately. For the Urban and Rural colleges, there was an increasing trend in the proportion never dropping out and Functional Potential levels. Thirty-eight point six per cent of the Low F.P. group, 46.2% of the Medium, and 51.2% of the High F.P. groups did not drop out from the Urban college, while 37.5% Low, 51.0% Medium and 62.5% High F.P. groups persisted in the Rural college. However, these trends were not statistically significant.

Among the Suburban college cases that were complete, a definite increasing statistical trend existed between the proportion not dropping out of college and the Functional Potential groups. The per cent of persisters were 37.9%, 45.4%, and 54.2% for the Low, Medium, and High groups. This trend was demonstrated by X^2 (2) = 7.55 ($p < .025$). Thus, differences were suggested among the three Functional Potential groups.

Drop/persist comparisons for the first and second year periods reinforced what most administrators and faculty already know--that the highest attrition occurs in the first year of college. In this particular study, early dropout appears greater for the Low Functional Potential group than for the High or Medium groups. Forty-three and five tenths per cent of the Low F.P. group dropped during their first year, as did 31.3% of the Medium group, and 26.2% of the High group. These figures compared to a 61.8% drop in the Low group

by the end of the second year, 53.8% of the Medium group, and 45.9% of the High group. One year dropout data by school, exclusive of Functional Potential, were also examined by the X^2 test of homogeneity. The Urban and Rural schools had 66.0% and 62.3% persistence from among 701 and 215 students. On the other hand, the Suburban school had a 72.2% persistence rate from among 960 students. This leads to a X^2 (2) = 11.79 ($p < .01$), suggesting a significant difference among the three schools.

Drop--Stay--Unknown. Examination of the data after two years led to a X^2 (2) = 1.49 (not significant). This revealed that with respect to dropout/persistence, all three schools had a similar experience, with about half of the known cases dropping and the other half of the known cases staying. For all three categories, a X^2 (4) = 105.44 ($p < .001$) resulted, with the Rural school having an equal number of students in each category while the Urban and Suburban had many fewer unknowns.

All the evidence from these data regarding dropout suggests that dropout is related to factors other than what the colleges do to the students. However, the Urban school seems to do a better job of retaining its students than the Suburban school, which had a higher number in the High Functional Potential group and thus should have had a higher number of persisters. The Rural school seems to have more of the extremes. Early--within the first year of school--they had a large number of dropouts but of those in this sample who did stay in school, a higher percentage received their associate degree after four semesters. Perhaps at this school, the rule of the medium--that schools attend chiefly to the average or middle student--does not apply. Indeed, it might be inferred that the Rural college makes less effort to hold its first semester

students but if a student does persist during this initial term, he has a better chance of finishing his program than do students from either of the other two colleges in our sample population.

Dropout/Persist and Other Variables. Degrees and information about institutional transfers are other dependent variables that provide information about students and their colleges. For those students who persisted in college, the three 3-D institutions were quite different. The Urban school had the lowest percentage (17%) of students receiving the AA degree while the Rural school had the highest percentage (74%). The Suburban school had about 24% receiving degrees. Thus, in this respect the Urban and Suburban schools are quite distinct from the Rural school.

Now in School? With respect to attendance in school at the time of the follow-up assessment (end of two years), the Urban and Suburban schools were similar in that no dropouts were re-enrolled. In contrast, the Rural school had about 47% of their previous dropouts re-enrolled--an in/out phenomenon currently giving rise to the term stopout which may well be a better indicator of status than dropout.

Among the persisting group, the Suburban school had 75.4% of 319 students enrolled and the Urban and Rural schools had 83% and 241 and 64 students still remaining. A X^2 (2) = 6.59 ($p < .05$) shows these percentages to differ among the three schools. From this information, it would seem that it takes some students more than two years to complete their programs. This extended time may be a reflection of either the stopout phenomenon previously noted, fewer school units carried, or a little of both.

Did They Transfer? If one questions dropout from higher education rather than from a particular institution, attrition figures would drop markedly. This applies to both the Urban and Suburban colleges, where dropouts had similar institutional transfer experiences and about 25% transferred. These results for the Urban and Suburban schools seem to indicate that the stay group had a higher proportion transferring. In contrast to the dropout group, this increase ranged from about 10% for the Urban college to about 20% for the Suburban college. The Rural school had an insufficient number of cases (2) for comparison. However, with these data, as with other information reported for the two-year period, a question of reliability is entertained because cumulative records had to be examined; in some cases, these records were incomplete and in others, the information was ambiguous.

Transfer Where? With respect to where dropout students transferred, the Suburban college tended to have a higher proportion (63%) transferring to four-year institutions than the Urban college (50%). Again because of an insufficient number of cases, comparison for the Rural school was not possible. In comparison to the drop group, a higher proportion of persisters at both the Urban and Suburban schools transferred to other institutions. This increase for both schools was approximately 25%, and again, the Rural school had an insufficient number of cases.

Group Cohesion and Drop/Persist. Group Cohesion is a variable described as a measure of relatedness to specific reference groups--peers, faculty, family, and the like. The Analysis of Variance was used to test whether Group Cohesion would relate to dropout within the first year. The Group Cohesion scores

of the 398 dropouts had a Mean = 2.523 whereas the 885 who did not drop had a Mean = 2.982 (significant at the <.01 level), thus suggesting that Group Cohesion scores are not the same for both dropout and persisters.

Crucial Issues

Hidden in most studies of attrition is the implication that persistence in school has a value of its own. If persistence is not a value, why is there such concern with the dropout, the student who withdraws from college before he completes his designated program or attains a degree--whether this be the AA, the B.A., or a graduate degree? Why study his background or his personality at all? The whole issue stems from the fact that college is seen as a "good" and, accordingly, any individual who fails to accept his opportunity to complete college is considered to be misguided or somehow inadequate. In actuality, however, students drop out of school for many reasons. Some return, some find satisfactions elsewhere, and still others vociferously reject the institution of school throughout their lives. For well over forty years, attrition rates in college have remained much the same (Iffert, 1957), ranging from 12 to 82 per cent (Summerskill, 1962) and averaging approximately 50 per cent. But while the percentage of post-secondary students who become academic dropouts remains fairly constant, the actual number soars because there are much greater numbers involved. And no matter how many "stay-in-school" campaigns are touted, no matter what threats of unemployment are leveled, the phenomenon persists. It is not likely, then, that the redundant information compiled by so many studies concerned with background data and selected traits of students will alter college practices or dropout figures. Findings from most studies are inconclusive (Eckland, 1964; Pervin, Reik and Dalrymple, 1966;

Mitchell and Moorehead, 1968; Panos and Astin, 1967). Organizational changes in the schools have not changed the situation. Why then, continue this type of study? The reasons must be found elsewhere.

Because the simplest measure of academic output is the number of students emerging from the system, and because our society attaches special importance to the certification of its people, dropout is considered important as a way of viewing educational systems. Students who exit prematurely, before completing a standard cycle, are seen as dropouts or failures, depending on whether they have left voluntarily or have been rejected by the sorting mechanism of the system. Granted that the non-persisters are not wholly a dead loss--that they do carry something useful away--"the important point is that societies and educational systems themselves make a sharp distinction between finished and unfinished products" (Coombs, 1968, p.65). The system's problem is that it judges itself by its output and its output represents the number of students who have completed a program. The problem for the individual, of course, is that "In a society where educational attainments--symbolized by certificates and degrees--are closely linked to preferred categories of employment and to social status, the student who finishes has much more promising career prospects. The one who drops out or fails, on the other hand, burns important bridges to the future. . . . When the dropout rate is high, the managers of such a system can be tormented by a sense of guilt suspecting that they may have been the hand that cut off the dropout's future chance" (Coombs, 1968, pp. 65, 69).

Put in such terms, the problem appears insoluble. In a selective system, specified percentages of students are pushed out--usually by examination--at

various stages along the way. In an open system, every person is given a chance and students must drop out if they are to leave. If students are dropping out of high school in fewer numbers now, the "problem" then becomes a matter of concern at the next higher level. In this generation it is particularly the junior college that has the "problem"--with over half of the students who enter these institutions failing to complete their programs. If, however, larger percentages of students did complete the two-year college and entered the upper division at the university, the problem would soon transfer itself to that level of education.

Thus, a very real dilemma is posed. If junior colleges screened students before entrance, young people would be denied the right of further education. If the staff encouraged dropout--for example, by assigning failing marks--students would be denied certification, might feel disconcerted, and the staff would be forced to justify its actions by peculiar rationalization e.g., "You're just not college material." If the schools accepted accountability for putting all students through, the "dropout problem" would soon become one for the subsequent level to reconcile--junior colleges to university, eventually, to graduate school.

Cohen and Brawer (1970) suggest that the very arguments are ludicrous. Indeed, the premises themselves are in error. A system that judges its worth by its "finished products" and a society that views certification as evidence of knowledge--these are the causes of the "dropout problem." If education were viewed in other ways, the problems would disappear. Indeed, the idea of viewing students as "input" and "output" of an educational system is offensive--both in principle and practice. It smacks of a school as a factory bringing in raw materials (students), processing them (teaching), and then

turning out manufactured goods (products). Possibly a better way to view the school is as a "field of force" and the students as "the charged particles which enter the field" (Laurits, 1967). Rather than simple raw material entering a factory, students would be seen as individuals--each moving at a certain velocity and spin and each headed in a certain direction. Under the "field of force" concept, then, each student would receive a new velocity, a new direction and, perhaps, a new spin because of his total experience. He is not a bit of stuff to be shaped but rather, a dynamic individual who is being influenced by the force field of education.

In light of these arguments and in spite of the many investigations dealing with the college dropout, many issues remain unresolved. Is the demand to deal with the "problem" of attrition, for example, really too rational, too old fashioned, and too out-worn for our society today? Do we actually protect society by excluding from our schools those members who cannot or will not meet certain demands made upon them? Is the open access concept making the term "dropout" archaic? Do we weaken ourselves in this mass exodus of people from institutions of higher education or is this just another feature of the kind of selectivity that apparently exists in a democracy which pledges itself to active education but simultaneously encourages passive (and sometimes not so passive) rebellion? If our basic trust in America today is to educate all who desire education through the fourteenth year, and in view of both the open-door policy of many junior colleges and some universities and the great diversity in certain dimensions of entering freshmen, is it reasonable to expect that attrition rates can be lowered? Much remains to be understood and to be done.

The same studies of persistence/withdrawal from college that so swell the literature also serve to compound our confusion about attrition--its causes, the purposes it serves--or fails to serve--the related social-economic-political questions, and plans for future patterns of schooling that consider the whole spectrum of human development. Like the vast numbers of neutral results--neutral because positive findings of one study often negate those of another--earlier words on attrition still hold. We have only a limited amount of knowledge about an issue that many people perceive to be a major problem of education today.

Despite this pessimistic view, some of the information now available is worth summarizing. For example, the family's influence on persistence/withdrawal in school appears to be a major consideration--whether this be seen in terms of the number of books in the home, the educational levels attained by the mother or by both parents, the socioeconomic status as measured by type of vocation or profession, the mobility patterns as reflected in the number of schools attended. Peer influence has also been isolated as a possible predictor of schooling, although less so than the ubiquitous GPA or tests of academic achievement administered previous to institutional enrollment.

For the community college freshmen engaged in the 3-D Project, some differential results stand out as particularly interesting. First, the influence of the school seems to be less important than might be expected. While only three schools were engaged in this study and thus--it is impossible to extend findings to a larger number of institutions, some diversity among these three schools is undoubtedly pervasive. On the other hand, Lombardi (1971) may be right in pointing to many similarities which are due merely to the fact that

the schools are all junior colleges, even though the differences in geographical area, types of populations, age, size and a few other dimensions do suggest some heterogeneity. Yet, the attrition rates in these three schools--Urban, Suburban, and Rural--are much the same. Some inter-school differences did prevail--for example, the initial drop rate in the Rural school exceeded those rates in the other schools but the rates after two years, four semesters, were amazingly similar. And of the few differences still remaining, few were statistically significant.

The variable called Group Cohesion or box scores also provides a different type of approach to separating out the potential withdrawal. Simply stated, if an individual is not able to relate to--feel an affinity for--become identified with--be a part of--other groups and other individuals, it is likely that he cannot see himself in a school situation when attendance is not forced. It is possible, of course, to be fairly isolated and still participate minimally when this is demanded--whether this be the compulsory school attendance law that deems everyone in this country must attend school until he is 16 years old--or the unwritten "law" that many people hold expecting high school completion. Whatever the hold, when the isolated or alienated individual is offered a choice of continuing or not continuing his schooling, he may succumb to the easiest alternative--to enter college because other types of choices (get a job, go on welfare, etc.) are less desirable. But when confronted with the choice of <u>persisting</u> in something one does not really care about--e.g., college--then it might be easier to withdraw then to continue to play the game. The basically isolated person may be encouraged to react in particular ways but left to his own devices, perhaps in a situation that he cares little about

in the first place and where he is left on his own more than usual--he is not given enough personal encouragement to persist.

As for ego strength, developmental level, maturity--however one defines the dimensions that I have described as Functional Potential--this variable does seem to bear watching as a predictor of college dropout. In most cases, the first year dropout tended to be in the group designated as Low Functional Potential. Students comprising the High Functional Potential group, on the other hand, were less likely to withdraw than were those in either the Low or Medium groups. Further investigation is needed to substantiate the notion that dropout is inversely related to Functional Potential (that is, as dropout decreases, Functional Potential moves from Low through Medium to High), but the idea is notable and worth pursuing. Perhaps in the concept of ego functioning we can also find important predictors of persistence or premature withdrawal from school--and perhaps the validity of these predictors will aid in the creation of programs that help to develop the individual in ways not yet assumed by the typical undergraduate college program.

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